

Nation's Restaurant News

THE TOP 500

Snapshots of success

How 15 brands thrived during
the worst crisis in modern
restaurant history



Getting to the
root of the
labor crisis
PAGE 20

Is chicken the
next frontier
for plant-based
innovation?
PAGE 52



Tommy's Tavern + Tap is looking to expand into a retail beverage line.

Operators rethink alcohol service as the pandemic fades

Some off-premises programs will fade away, but other new strategies are taking hold

by **Mark Hamstra**

With bars and restaurants around the country severely limited in their onsite offerings for much of the last 18 months, operators tried a variety of strategies to generate revenues from the traditionally profitable alcoholic beverage side of the business.

A handful launched virtual wine tastings and other events; some added food to their menus in order to comply with local requirements; many tried selling cocktails to go; still others merely discounted their alcohol

inventory to move it out the door in bottles.

What many operators have discovered, however, is that consumers are eager to return to their pre-pandemic socializing routines in bars and restaurants in the wake of widespread vaccinations and the decline in COVID-19 infections.

Den Hospitality, which operates The Garret Bars and other concepts in New York City, is one of several operators that was able to drive some business with cocktails-to-go during the past year but has seen little

continued on page 18



Logan's Run in Brooklyn refreshed its menu, including the six-piece jumbo chicken wings.



Throw Social has shifted its expansion plans to focus on warmer states.

need for them as restaurants and bars have reopened.

"We're no longer offering batched cocktails to-go because it was really something we launched as a way for our staff to continue working, and a way for the community to stay engaged," said Gavin Moseley, cofounder of Den Hospitality. "We're encouraging guests to come into the bars since the restrictions have been lifted."

New York ended its to-go alcohol service allowance on June 24, with the conclusion of its state of emergency.

Other operators, however, are seeking to take their pandemic-driven off-premises

"It has been an absolute home run, the kitchen has been busier than it ever was pre-pandemic."

— Geoff Willis, Logan's Run

cocktail programs to a new level.

Thomas Bonfiglio, owner of Triple T Hospitality Group, which operates the Tommy's Tavern + Tap and Tio Tacos + Tequila concepts in New York and New Jersey, expanded his restaurant operations during the pandemic, and is now exploring translating his company's success into a new retail beverage product line.

"The bar program took a big hit during the pandemic, but we have some signature cocktails that are really big sellers for us," Bonfiglio said.

The company had been offering some of its most popular specialty drinks for off-premises sales, and is now in the process of turning them into retail products that the restaurants could sell in bottles and cans on premises and through other retail outlets, under the direction of Mike Spence, beverage director at the company.

Triple T is seeking to bottle red and white versions of its sangrias, and to put four of its specialty cocktails into cans in the form of hard seltzers. Spence said he's

hoping to have the drinks formulated without artificial preservatives so that they can meet Whole Foods' stringent requirements for ingredients.

"The science behind it is the biggest challenge," he said. "We want to maintain the quality and at the same time make sure we are giving them some shelf life."

In addition to potential retail distribution, Spence is also hoping to get the drinks into sports and event venues such as the PNC Bank Arts Center and MetLife Stadium in New Jersey. He also plans to make them available for drinking outdoors on the restaurants' patios.

The four seltzers, which Spence said he tentatively plans to produce under the name Tommy's Triple T Cocktails, include Tommy's Chill, Orange Crush, Strawberry Mint Lemonade, and Mango Mojito. Plans call for offering them in both mixed and single-variety four-packs.

Creating a new menu

The restrictions on alcohol service during the pandemic also inspired some operators

to create food menus so that they could serve drinks in their lounge areas. Some municipalities only allowed alcohol service with food, which led some bars in New York, for example, to begin offering minimal, uninspired food menus.

Logan's Run in Brooklyn was one of those, said Geoff Willis, a bartender-turned-chef at the two-story lounge. He said he was discouraged by the sight of unappetizing hot dogs sitting uneaten on customers' tables. As the only bartender on the staff with extensive experience in restaurant kitchens, Willis took it upon himself to create a higher-quality food menu that has been a hit with customers.

Willis fired up the existing fryer and flat grill that had been out of use since long before the pandemic, upgraded the hot dog with house-made toppings such as pickled onions and relish, and added chicken wings and burgers, which also featured Willis' homemade toppings and sauces. Willis created the dishes so that any of the bartenders could prepare them to

order themselves.

The six-piece jumbo chicken wings — dubbed Big Ass Wings on the menu — are brined for 24 hours and deep-fried, served with a choice of four house-made sauces: Buffalo, lemon pepper, teriyaki and a Nashville hot-style sauce. The Angus beef burger is served on a Martin's potato roll with American cheese, house-made pickled onions, house-made pickles, lettuce and tomato, and topped with a house-made sauce containing mustard, ketchup, pickle juice and sriracha.

"It has been an absolute home run," Willis said of the food menu. "The kitchen has been busier than it ever was pre-pandemic."

Now the restaurant is considering adding brunch items on weekends and has hired a part-time cook to fill in for Willis on his days off.

Adding a happy hour

Some operators have rethought significant aspects of their business models for the bar area of their operations.

Greg Casten, founder of Fish & Fire Food Group, which